"I'll Take My Stand"— Fifty Years Later

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A RECENT SPEAKER at Vanderbilt University began his address with the statement, "Whether you like it or not, Vanderbilt University is known away from Nashville as the home of the Agrarians." Some fifty years after the first publication of the Agrarian manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, it has been reissued for a fourth time. "Ridiculed, condemned, championed," as Mr. Louis Rubin has said in his introduction to the 1962 edition, "it has been everything except ignored, for that it cannot be by anyone who wants to understand a complex American region." In a country where State Governors boast of the acquisition of new industry for their states, as a measure for judging the success of their administrations, the Agrarians have been condemned for opposing industrialization, or in the words of their critics, "progress." Although some few writers have championed the views of the Agrarians, many more have taken issue with them and have called them unrealistic and non-progressive. At this time of economic turmoil and industrial disasters, many thoughtful people are taking a second look at the proposals made fifty years ago by the Twelve Southerners.

What were these proposals which created so much controversy? Some critics have accused the Agrarians of nostalgia and have censured them for being resistant to change. The Agrarian movement, as I view it, was directed toward the realization of a community conducive to the creative life of the artist, poet, and scholar, in peaceful and pleasant surroundings, away from the noise and tempo of city life. They favored communities where the individual could be self-sufficient and develop his or her own potential to the fullest. People can be themselves only in small groups. The Agrarians believed that this quality of self-sufficiency was the basis of happiness and that it was being destroyed by industrialism.

The Fugitives, often confused with the Agrarians, were poets. They also originated at Vanderbilt and published their poetry magazine, *The Fugitive*, during the years, 1922-1925. They preceded the Agrarians by several years. Four of the Fugitive poets were leaders in the Agrarian movement and both groups were revolting against an industrial society. The Agrarians thought the environment they were seeking could best be found in an agricultural setting. Some of the group objected to being called Agrarians. The name tagged them and gave rise to many ridiculous criticisms.

At a recent discussion of Agrarianism at Vanderbilt University, Dr. Richard Couto, Director for the Center of Health Services, Dr. Donald Doyle, History Department, and Dr. Malcolm Getz, Economics Department, all presented papers highly critical of the Agrarians. Dr. Doyle began by saying that no such society as proposed by the Agrarians in *I'll Take My Stand* had ever existed or could exist. Dr. Couto's paper described the terrible conditions he had witnessed in rural communities in Appalachia and in Haywood County, Tennessee, and stated that such conditions were typical of agrarian life. He wondered how anyone could prefer such living to urban life. Dr. Getz, the economist, was outraged by the idea that industrial progress was producing many results harmful and even dangerous to human life. All three men failed to comprehend the real meaning of *I'll Take My Stand*.

For a better understanding of the Agrarian point of view, I want to quote excerpts from the statement made by Frank Owsley at the Fugitive Reunion in 1956, twenty-six years after the first publication of *I'll Take My Stand*. He began by saying that the:

> Agrarian movement was a revolt against something and a revolt for something. Many of us had been working in different fields of human activity. I had been doing research work in History...in Southern and sectional history, and more and more aware, both as an individual, as well as a member of a group of friends,...that the people of America were losing the basic values of civilization, that we were going as a nation into materialism, that money value had become the real basic value, that the sense of community was disappearing...that the whole civilization in this country was becoming cruder and cruder, that the things we thought a civilized country stood for were disappearing.... We became, I think, in our writings very deliberately provocative.... We advocated, I suppose, an agrarian way of life as...being the only examples in history where civilization had developed. And also a belief that the high-powered modern industrialization and materialism would not either develop or maintain a civilization very long....Summing up, briefly, then, I think our revolt was against materialism—the same thing in a way, that the Fugitives had revolted against—and against stereotyped forms of living and thinking. But it was a revolt to something, and it might not have been the right thing, but it was the right direction, perhaps.

Some of these same ideas were expressed by John Crowe Ransom in his prophetic essay in *I'll Take My Stand*. He stated that the formula for Progress could:

> involve its practitioners in self-torture and suicide just as readily as in the enjoyment of life. In most societies man has adapted himself to his environment with plenty of intelligence to secure easily his material necessities from the graceful bounty of nature. And then ordinarily he concludes a truce with nature, and he and nature seem to live on terms of mutual respect and amity, and his loving arts, religions, and philosophies come spontaneously into being: these are the blessings of peace. But the latter-day societies have been seized—none quite so violently as our American one—with the strange idea that the human destiny is not to secure an honorable peace with nature, but to wage an unrelenting war on nature. Men, therefore, determine to conquer nature to a degree which is quite beyond reason so far as specific human advantage is concerned, and which enslaves them to toil and turnover. Man is boastfully declared to be a natural scientist essentially, whose strength is capable of crushing and making over to his own desires the brute materiality which is nature; but in his infinite contention with this materiality he is really capitulating to it. His engines transform the face of nature—a little—but when they have been perfected, he must invent new engines that will perform even more heroically. And always the next engine of his invention, even though it be that engine which is to invade the material atom and exploit the most secret treasury of nature's wealth, will be a physical engine; and the man who uses it will be engaged in substantially the same struggle as was the primitive man with the hoe....Our progressivists are the latest version of those pioneers who conquered the wilderness.

In the fifty some years since this essay was written we have witnessed the fulfillment of much that Mr. Ransom has said. Lyle Lanier, formerly Provost and Executive Vice President of the University of Illinois and one of the three surviving Agrarians, was moderator for the Vanderbilt discussion referred to above. It was on the subject of Progress. Dr. Lanier's essay

in *I'll Take My Stand* was entitled, "A Critique of the Philosophy of Progress" and was to a certain extent the basis for the discussion. In preparation for the panel Dr. Lanier had made an outline of suggested topics. Under the heading, "*The Idea of 'Progress' in the Ethos of American Industrial Society*," he gave as the definition of Progress the accepted conventional meaning of the word, "Progress is beneficent social change based upon continuous economic growth; more specifically, ever increasing production of goods and services to meet expanding human needs." The principal instrumentalities of progress were listed as "science and technology; education; economic free enterprise; corporate industrial organization and management; and democratic political institutions." The gains expected from such developments were better living conditions; increased happiness of the individual; steadily improving society in the family, community, state, and nation; and finally growing international affluence and good will.

Some of the results of the pursuit of Progress were listed by Dr. Lanier as "deleterious by-products." First among these harmful by-products of industrial progress is the degradation of our natural environment—air and water pollution. Almost every day we are told of some area where water has been polluted. Some wells in the area of Smyrna, Tennessee, were reported to contain cancer producing chemicals. Fish have been found to be contaminated in an area of the Tennessee River, near Huntsville, Alabama, in which waste materials have been dumped. The people in the area are dependent on the fish for food and a livelihood. Air pollution in the Los Angeles area has been so bad that the lives of many people have been endangered. I shall not attempt to list more of the endless examples of air and water pollution. Other endangered natural resources include the destruction of the forests, the depletion of soil fertility by erosion, the destruction of wildlife, and despoilation of the landscape by such industries as strip mining which in addition depletes the mineral and fossil resources.

Another large area of harmful by-products of industrial progress is the impairment of human health by the use of agricultural chemicals, food additives and artificial "foods," insufficiently tested drugs and the results to our health of occupational hazards, such as exposure to cancer producing chemicals and radiation, and dangers from nuclear waste and explosives. There were in the United States three large landfills for disposal of hazardous materials. Two of them have recently been closed by orders of the governors of the states in which they are located, due to evidences of danger to the surrounding environment. Only one of the disposal areas, located in South Carolina, still remains open; and the amount of waste they will receive has been greatly reduced. We are thus faced with a dilemma. For there is a threat to medical treatment and experimentation if these disposal areas are not available, and yet the landfills themselves are a hazard to our health. We face daily such hazards as were experienced by the people who lived near Three Mile Island and yet industry must have the necessary energy in order to continue to produce ever increasing amounts of goods.

Urbanization has brought a decline in the quality of life, as for example, the "inner-city blight," housing overcrowding, juvenile delinquency and crime, drug abuse, racial and ethnic discord, noise, traffic congestion, and the abnormal tempo of urban existence. There has been a deterioration of social life by family disintegration. Divorce has reached an all-time high followed by impaired parent-child relations. Community ties have been weakened and social and religious institutions have suffered as a result. School busing has done much to destroy the community. We have been plagued with economic disorders, such as poverty and unemployment, excessive inflation, declining economic growth, energy crisis, ever increasing consumer and government debt, foreign-trade imbalance, the steady climb in the value of gold and the weakness of the dollar. International tensions have increased and our national security has been

endangered by the possibility of nuclear war and annihilation. Only recently twenty pounds of enriched uranium, enough to make several atomic bombs, was reported missing from a plant at Erwin, Tennessee. Prior to this during the past several years, 245 pounds of the same material has been discovered missing from this plant. So far none of the missing substance has been found. It has been conjectured that some day this destructive material will get into the hands of desperate people and we shall all face annihilation. Tensions have increased between industrialized and underdeveloped nations, complicated by conflicting ideologies of communistic and democratic societies within the industrialized world. Finally for the artist, poet, and scholar, there has been a general dissatisfaction with the inability of a civilization directed to material improvement to satisfy the human spirit.

All of these destructive by-products can be traced to progress in terms of industrial development. ABC Television made a study of the effects on various regions of the United States of the recession which we have inevitably been facing. In every case, it was found that the industrial areas would suffer most. The agricultural areas of the West and South will be hurt less than the great industrial areas of the North and Middle West. Detroit, Chicago, New York, and other large industrial cities of the North will suffer more than the agricultural areas.

A number of books have been written focusing on the inevitable decline of economic progress in industrial countries and here in the United States we are beginning to witness such a decline. Some of the social changes destined to produce economic decline include excessive worldwide population growth, decreasing natural resources and energy shortages, and growing world competition between industrialized and undeveloped nations for an inadequate supply of resources.

I'll Take My Stand offers some hope for a happy existence after an economic decline. This is perhaps one reason for the revival of interest in the book and its authors. It is clear to us fifty years after the Twelve Southerners took their stand that we cannot simply reject the inventions and discoveries made by science and technology. Dr. John Compton stated in a paper delivered to the Round Table Club of Nashville that the Agrarians were wrong in their efforts to stop the development of urban industrial growth but they were not wrong about the "central values for which they took their stand. They correctly saw the psychic and social costs of industrial development and they correctly saw that agrarian life embodied human qualities which ought to be saved." If we change our measures of economic growth and success from quantitative to qualitative growth we can better understand the qualities for which the Agrarians were striving.

I would like to close this essay with a quotation from Edward F. Renshaw's book, *The End of Progress: Adjusting to a No-Growth Economy* (pp. 18-19):

> An end to growth in material output would not necessarily be incompatible with economic growth of kinds not well measured by our present stock of indicators, notably growth in the quality of goods and services...with individual excellence, with devotion to one's craft, with love for one's children, with high achievement in the arts, with eloquence, and with precise thought or careful expression, with enhanced sense of community, with deepened religious faith, or with care for the scarred yet still nurtured earth itself.

Hoping to inspire the kind of growth suggested by Mr. Renshaw which would satisfy the human spirit is, I believe, the reason the Twelve Southerners took their stand.